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“Son of Man” Comes to the Judgment in Daniel 7:13

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Few, if any, of the debates that have roiled the theological waters over the years have been more persistent than the one over the term “Son of Man.” The discussion goes back at least to Theodoret of Cyrrhus (393-466), and it shows no sign of abating in our day.

Part of the interest in this subject stems from the fact that there are sixty-two gospel records of occasions when Jesus referred to himself as “the Son of Man.” Furthermore, in several of these He seems to be intentionally identifying himself with the mysterious son-of-man figure who appears in the judgment scene of Daniel 7:13.¹

Like other academic discussions, this one has at times turned on points of secular philosophy that have relatively little spiritual or practical relevance.² Nevertheless, an insight into the role of the “son of man” in the judgment has important implications for our understanding of the plan of salvation.

Here is the crucial passage in which the term “son of man” appears in the book of Daniel:

I kept looking
Until thrones were set up,
And the Ancient of Days took His seat;
His vesture was like white snow
And the hair of His head like pure wool.

¹ Matt 24:30; 26:64; Mark 13:26; 14:62.

² For a discussion of some of the alternative proposals, see G. Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1974), 146-148, or <http://www.cmfellowship.org/back-issues/march-april99/sonofman.htm>. “Son of man” is also an important term to some non-Christian groups such as Jehovah’s Witnesses (see http://www.bible411.com/christian-classics/sits/volume5/v5_study6.htm), theosophists (see, for example, <http://www.spiritweb.org/spirit/esoterism-gomez-01.html>), followers of the New Age as well as to various eastern cults. Branch Davidians hold that the “Son of Man” title applies equally to “Yashua” (Jesus) and to David Koresh (<http://sevenseals.com/clouds.html>). It is not likely that the amount of material on this subject will diminish any time soon.

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His throne was ablaze with flames,
Its wheels were a burning fire.
A river of fire was flowing
And coming out from before Him;
Thousands upon thousands were attending Him,
And myriads upon myriads were standing before Him;
The court sat,
And the books were opened.

Then I kept looking because of the sound of the boastful words which the horn was speaking; I kept looking until the beast was slain, and its body was destroyed and given to the burning fire. As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but an extension of life was granted to them for an appointed period of time.

I kept looking in the night visions,
And behold, with the clouds of heaven
One like a Son of Man was coming,
And He came up to the Ancient of Days
And was presented before Him.
And to Him was given dominion, Glory and a kingdom,
That all the peoples, nations and men of every language
Might serve Him.
His dominion is an everlasting dominion
Which will not pass away;
And His kingdom is one
Which will not be destroyed.³

A Study in Contrasts. The first important observation is that the Son of man figure in Daniel 7 is a study in contrasts. There is a contrast between the human figure in this prophecy and the fierce animals that have preceded him. After the struggles of the great carnivores, it is a relief when a human being, a “man-like” figure, appears on the scene.

There is also an important contrast between the human figure and the immediate context of the courtroom scene. In Dan 7:9-14 everything is heavenly: There is the Ancient of Days, the “God of heaven.”⁴ There are myriads of heavenly angels. Even the transport vehicle is called the “clouds of heaven.” Then, seeming almost out of place in this situation, there comes—“a human being.”⁵

A third contrast is between the way the Son of Man comes in to the judgment and the way He goes out. He comes in after the Ancient of Days has taken His place and after the tribunal is seated. And He comes in under escort—He is brought in. The passage says: “They brought him near before him.” Rather than sitting as judge, the Son of Man is brought in to stand before the tribunal. But He does not go out the way He came in. He goes out a King. The sentence of

³ Dan 7:9-14, New American Standard Bible, Copyright 1989-1997, The Lockman Foundation.

⁴ Dan 2:18, 19, 28, 37, 44 etc.

⁵ The first and best-attested meaning of the term “son of man” is simply a human being, as in the parallel lines of Ps 8:4: “What is man that you take thought of him, / and the son of man that you care for him?”

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tribunal is: "And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed."⁶

A Jewish Reader in Daniel's Day. If some elements of this judgment scene are puzzling to us, it may be that we are trying to relate it to modern systems of jurisprudence rather than looking for a more immediate model in Daniel's time. A Hebrew reader who attempted to picture the heavenly courtroom would certainly have thought of the sanctuary. In the Israelite mind, the heavenly Judge was Yahweh, who was present in the unapproachable glory of the *Shekinah*.⁷ between the two worshipping cherubim.⁸ His judgment throne was the *kapporeth*, the "atonement cover" over the ark.⁹

Into this supremely holy place, where every symbol represented heavenly things, no human being ever went, except once a year on *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement. There was no doubt in the Hebrew mind that *Yom Kippur* was the judgment day.¹⁰ On this solemn day, the whole nation passed in review before God. But the people did not file through the sanctuary one by one to appear personally before God. Every man, woman and child went in, but they did so in the person of their proxy, their substitute or stand-in. On *Yom Kippur* the high priest entered on behalf of all who had trusted in the provisions of the "daily" or *tamid* ministry for their forgiveness and atonement from guilt.¹¹ But He went in not only for the people, but also as the people.

The high priest did not go in to discuss the cases pending with God. He was not a modern lawyer who reasons and pleads, trying to convince the judge of his cause. He went in having assumed the people's guilt, and standing as a defendant in their stead. But most importantly, He went in having also made

⁶ The exaltation through humiliation theme is echoed in Paul's hymn of praise recorded in Phil 2:5-11.

⁷ Isa 33:14; 1 Tim 6:16. The Aramaic "*Shekinah*" is from the Talmud. It means "presence."

⁸ Exod 25:22; Num 7:89; 1 Sam 4:4; 2 Kgs 19:15; 1 Chron 13:6; Isa 37:16; Ezek 10:1.

⁹ Exod 25:22; later references, such as 2 Sam 6:2, pictured the Lord "enthroned above the cherubim" with the *kapporeth* possibly as His footstool. In any case, it was the place where atonement was made. The term "mercy seat" has no textual basis, except, perhaps, Heb. 4:16. It came to the KJV through Tyndale, derived, apparently, from Luther's German *Bibel*.

¹⁰ In fact, this concept remains unchanged: "*Yom Kippur* is probably the most important holiday of the Jewish year. . . . [There are] "books" in which God inscribes all our names. On *Yom Kippur*, the judgment entered in these books is sealed. This day is, essentially, your last appeal, your last chance to change the judgment, to demonstrate your repentance and make amends" ("Judaism 101" at <http://www.jewfaq.org/holiday4/htm>. Accessed Aug 26, 2000). From ancient times the rabbis understood that the judgment of *yom kippur* was a reflection of what went on in the sanctuary of heaven (Talmud, *Yoma* 7:2; see also, Jacob Milgrom, *The Anchor Bible: Leviticus 1-16* [New York: Doubleday, 1991], 1016, 1017).

¹¹ The priest was required to eat a small portion of each sacrifice for sin except the relatively few whose blood was brought into the sanctuary (Lev 6:26, 30). This ensured his role as a sin bearer. For further corroboration of this idea, see below, on Dan 7: 26, 27.

full atonement for this guilt by blood sacrifice.¹² This accomplished, the outcome of the judgment could no longer be in doubt.

King On the Mountain. This view of Daniel 7 through the lens of the OT cultic motif fills what must otherwise be considered a gap in the scene. Here is the courtroom, here are the thrones, the books are opened, and the tribunal takes its seat. But where are the defendants? True, the boisterous little horn is punished as the judgment is beginning,¹³ but he is not hailed before the court; he is neither accused nor examined nor sentenced. In fact, contrary to what we would naturally expect, none of the beast powers is placed on trial before the heavenly court. The only one brought in is the Son of Man.

But this is an incongruity only if we fail to catch the basic thrust of chapter 7 and the question it is answering. In Daniel 7 the empires are playing the old game of King on the Mountain. Who is king on the mountain? “I am,” says the Lion. “No, I am,” says the bear. “That’s what you think!” says the leopard, and each one in turn topples its predecessor. At the end comes, worst of all, the terrible horn power. In his wild grasp for power, the horn even fancies himself a rival to the “Most High”¹⁴ and makes life bitter for God’s people.¹⁵

Given these antecedents, the focus and outcome of the judgment scene are not at all incongruous with the rest of the chapter. Daniel 7 is about empowerment; it is about dominion. Who is the true King—not of the mountain, but of the universe? The answer resounds in the verdict of the heavenly tribunal: “And there was given [to the Son of Man] dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed.”¹⁶

A Victory for God’s People. The horn and the other evil powers are not hailed before the court, but the judgment is the solution to the problem they represent. Once the Son of Man is empowered, He exercises His authority on behalf of His besieged people. Thus His victory is their victory, as well. Jesus referred to this in the parable of a nobleman who “went to a distant country to receive a kingdom for himself, and then return. . . . But his citizens hated him and sent a delegation after him, saying, ‘We do not want this man to reign over us.’ When He returned, after receiving the kingdom, He . . . [said:] “These ene-

¹² Lev 16:5-11; Heb 9:12.

¹³ Dan 7:11; cf. Rev 13:3.

¹⁴ From the parallel figures in Daniel 8:11 and Revelation 13:6, we learn that he expressed this rivalry by attacking the sanctuary and blaspheming against it.

¹⁵ Dan 7:25.

¹⁶ The word “triumphalism” is sometimes heard in theological discussions, and it generally carries a negative connotation. Here is true Biblical triumphalism: It is the triumph of God through the judgment. Cf. Dan 2:44: “And in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom, that will never be destroyed: and the kingdom will not be left to other people, but it will break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it will stand for ever.”

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mies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slay them in my presence."¹⁷

Jesus alludes to the empowerment theme of Daniel 7 when He describes the second coming: "And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory."¹⁸ At the conclusion of the judgment, the same cloudy chariot that carried the Son of Man to stand before the judgment bar carries him to earth to claim the fruits of His victory.

Daniel 7:26, 27 also shows the judgment as a victory for God's people. It says: "But the court will sit for judgment, and [the horn's] dominion will be taken away, annihilated and destroyed forever. Then the sovereignty, the dominion and the greatness of all the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be given to the people of the saints of the Most High; His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all the dominions will serve and obey Him." This declaration of dominion is exactly the same as the one that was passed on the Son of Man according to v. 13! Here is further evidence that the Son of Man, as high priest, is the stand-in or proxy of His people in the judgment, because the sentence that was passed on him is a sentence on His people, as well. His victory is theirs.¹⁹

This is, in fact, the most essential idea of justification by faith, that by taking our place on the cross, Jesus, the Son of Man, earned the right to take our place in the judgment. Jesus referred to this when He said of himself: The Father "has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man."²⁰

In the ancient sanctuary, all who trusted in the provisions of the sanctuary for forgiveness and cleansing were approved in the judgment; none was lost. But those who remained indifferent on that day, who failed to gather at the sanctuary and "afflict" their souls, would be "cut off" from the covenant of peace; they would lose their place among the chosen people.²¹

Now, as then, God's people are not called to file through the sanctuary in person as their cases are reviewed before the heavenly tribunal. But the role of our Substitute, the Son of Man, in the heavenly court can hardly be considered a dusty issue of academic hair splitting. It is of vital interest to all who are waiting in the outer court for our great High Priest to return for His own.

¹⁷ Luke 19:12-27.

¹⁸ Matt 24:30. Cf. Mark 14:61, 62: "The high priest was questioning Him, and saying to Him, 'Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?' And Jesus said, 'I am; and you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.'"

¹⁹ Rev 3:21: "To him that overcomes I will grant to sit with me on my throne, as I also overcame, and sat down with my Father on his throne." Cf. Rev 2:26, 27.

²⁰ John 5:27.

²¹ Lev 23:28-29.

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